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WHISTLER

ETCHINGS



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Whistler etchings

**Commentary by
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Part I

1

***Portrait of Whistler, 1859*
etching and drypoint
Rosenwald Collection**

James McNeill Whistler, one of the principal American artists of the late nineteenth century, is best known as a painter, specifically because of his painting of his mother. However, Whistler executed more than four-hundred-fifty etchings and approximately two hundred lithographs, so that his work as a printmaker is equally important as his work as a painter.

There was an intensity about Whistler in every respect. When he was working on his self-portraits, as well as when he was working on his portraits of other people, he seemed to be trying to penetrate to the psyche of the person or — in the self-portraits — trying to penetrate to his own

psyche; he was attempting to understand something about himself by looking at himself. This is the second of three self-portrait etchings by Whistler, although throughout his life, he did many self-portrait paintings. This etching was done in 1859, when he was twenty-five years old, and the intensity of his expression and the dapper boater hat that he is wearing tell you a lot about his character. He was interested in being a stylish young man, and this interest in style lasted for the rest of his life.

2

***The Mustard Merchant, 1858*
etching
Rosenwald Collection**

Whistler's first published set of prints, titled *Twelve Etchings from Nature*, was issued in 1858, in both Paris and London. The series is most commonly referred to as the "French Set." In London, the prints were published from the address of Seymour Haden, his brother-in-law, who was not only an eminent surgeon, but also an amateur etcher and great collector of etchings. Whistler studied

Haden's collection, which contained many splendid examples of Rembrandt's prints; they were very important to Whistler's development as an etcher.

The Mustard Merchant is one of the most popular of Whistler's early prints. It was published not only as part of the French Set, but also in an edition of two hundred impressions for a volume titled *English Etchings*, issued in 1886. This print was included in the Paris Salon of 1859. It is important in several respects, in particular, because it introduces one of Whistler's primary compositional interests — the framed image, the frame within a frame. He was interested in the appearance of the facade of the house and in observing what is happening through the doorway, behind that wall. He often established a composition by using a framing device, placing figures at a distance in a frame; frequently they are seen through a doorway. In addition, he often placed a figure between two spaces — as you see with the young woman at the left hovering in the doorway; she's not outside the doorway with the artist; she's not inside the doorway with the central figure, the mustard merchant. This is a device that Whistler continued to use in many of his etchings.

***Street at Saverne, 1858*
etching
Rosenwald Collection**

This is Whistler's first night subject. Later in his career he explored the night light in his paintings, in his watercolors, and in his prints. He came to call these night scenes *nocturnes* — one of several musical terms that he used in titling his works. This nocturne, one of the French Set, is called *Street at Saverne*.

One of the ways that Whistler turned this into a night subject was by heavily etching various areas, but also he obtained a night effect by leaving residual surface tone from the ink on the plate. When Whistler wiped the plate, he would leave dense, dark areas of ink on it, and the plate would print much darker than would a cleanly wiped plate. Just as with Rembrandt's prints, where you find some impressions wiped clean and other impressions left with large coatings of ink on the surface, Whistler's etchings show his experiments with inking to achieve varying tonal qualities.

Whistler printed the French Set plates — and most of his

The drawing style in the French Set is quite specific. Whistler used numerous lines laid next to each other to form various textures. He was interested in the surfaces of things, so that you see one kind of surface texture on the doorjamb and another kind on the wall itself, where the bricks are sketched in, to show the difference between the wall and the sidewalk. He was also very interested in qualities of light; the figure inside the room is surrounded by darkness, so that she becomes central, but still she remains mysterious. You don't know about her in the way you know something about Whistler from looking at his portrait of himself.

3

***The Kitchen, 1858*
etching
Rosenwald Collection**

The Kitchen, another of the French Set etchings, was reissued in an edition of fifty at a later date, 1884, by the Fine Art Society. It is one of Whistler's best-known early etchings and is regarded as one of the most beautiful etchings in the French

Set. Here again, *The Kitchen* shows Whistler using a framing device, with a mysterious woman standing at the back of the room. Whistler created great distance between himself — the artist, the viewer, and the principal figure in the composition. In both subject and in its richness of tone, *The Kitchen* is one of the earliest examples of Whistler's admiration for Dutch seventeenth-century art, not only the work of Rembrandt, but that of Vermeer, De Hooch, and others of that period.

In his intaglio prints, Whistler primarily used two techniques — one was etching and the other drypoint. To produce his etchings, Whistler would cover the surface of a copper plate with an acid resist substance and would draw through that acid resist, revealing the copper plate below. The plate then would be immersed in an acid bath; wherever Whistler had drawn lines through the resist, the copper plate would be eaten away, creating grooves which later would hold ink. In inking a plate such as this, ink would be pressed down into each of the grooves. All of the residual ink was cleaned off the surface of the plate, and the inked plate, covered by the sheet of paper to be printed, then put through the etching press.

5

***The Music Room, 1858* etching Rosenwald Collection**

This etching is another example of Whistler's interest in the effects of light and also in every-

day life as a subject. The people here are Seymour Haden at the left, reading a newspaper; Mr. Haden's associate, Mr. Traer, in the back behind the lamp; and Deborah Haden, Whistler's half-sister, at the front. Whistler's prints of the Haden family, done early in his career, are exemplary in respect to his knowledge of the realist teachings of his



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French contemporary, Gustave Courbet. There's a sense of informality about all of Whistler's etchings of the Haden family — indeed about all of his etchings of this period. Whistler concentrated on everyday subjects, on everyday activities, on the casualness of life — the scenes that one comes upon just walking into a room. You don't have the feeling that anything has been posed for the artist, but that the artist has come upon a subject and is work-

ing with that subject as he's found it.

6

***The Forge, 1861* drypoint Rosenwald Collection**

The Forge is the first of Whistler's many etching-and-drypoints and lithograph prints of

this subject. This is a drypoint. In the drypoint technique, the artist draws lines directly on an uncoated copper plate, rather than immersing a coated plate in acid, as in etching. In scratching directly into the plate, a burr is raised around each of the lines. This burr actually holds the ink, rather than a grooved line below the surface. Each time the copper plate is inked and put through the press, the force of the press wears down the burr



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slightly. This makes drypoint prints a real test for a print connoisseur's knowledge, for it is important to have an early impression that is very rich and dark in the areas of drypoint drawing, for example, the dark blacks on the furnace at the left, or in the area at the base of the anvil.

Whistler's prints often contain intriguing vignettes in the areas that are in the distance and in the shadows, so it is important to look carefully at them. At the right of the print is a complete still-life, visible through the doors, and to the left of the blacksmith there is a shadowy figure. In some cases, he describes the figures clearly, for example, the three central male figures; yet the women and children on the right are barely sketched in at all.

7

***Black Lion Wharf, 1859* etching Rosenwald Collection**

At the end of 1858, Whistler left Paris and moved to London, where he kept his principal home for the next several years, although he traveled frequently

back to the continent. About this time he was exploring various ways of describing form in his etchings. This interest was paramount in his second set of etchings, titled *A Series of Sixteen Etchings of Scenes on the Thames and other Subjects*. When he moved to London, Whistler became fascinated by the industrial life and commercial shipping along the Thames River, and for a period of time, he took up residence in an area called Wapping, or Rotherhithe — on the Thames, at the south end of the city.

This print demonstrates Whistler's concern with different ways of rendering textures and form. If you look at the distant band of buildings, you see very particularized means for representing the varied shingled surfaces of the buildings; small marks, one next to another, describe light, form, almost color. In the middle ground, Whistler became much freer in the way he approached drawing — using long strokes rather than short strokes, blocking out large shapes with looser, scratchier lines, rather than precise, clearly delineated strokes.

In the Thames Set, as with the French Set etchings, Whistler was very specifically involved with recording life as seen in an

everyday way; he was not interested in going out to find “beautiful” subjects, but in taking ordinary subjects, workaday subjects, as he found them.

8

***The Limeburner, 1859* etching Rosenwald Collection**

This etching, *The Limeburner*, also from the Thames Set, is another excellent example of Whistler's continuing exploration of the framed image that we saw in his earlier French Set etching, *The Mustard Merchant*. Here, we look through the building's entrance into a central courtyard, where W. Jones, the limeburner, stands facing us. We see a clearly described portrait of Mr. Jones, in contrast to the very mysterious figure crouching in the background, visible through the next framing device, another doorway opening out to the Thames River.

Here, Whistler was also working with the way light defines form and creates movement through the composition. He placed areas of deep shadow next to areas of brilliant sunlight. These dramatic contrasts

of light and shadow evoke the sense of moving from the interior space out into the distance to the ships and buildings along the Thames. In Whistler's prints, we are drawn into the interplay between areas of great density of drawing and areas of open space. For example, in the foreground, a deep floor — framed by the dark, richly textured doorway — leads our eyes toward the central area, to a stark, brilliant white wall framing the lime-burner. Juxtaposing these dark areas of dense drawing with bright, open areas is characteristic of Whistler throughout his work.

9

***Rotherhithe*, 1860 etching and drypoint Rosenwald Collection**

Whistler started to work the *Series of Sixteen Etchings of Scenes on The Thames and Other Subjects* in 1859, shortly after he moved to London; however, the formal publication of this portfolio didn't take place until 1871. Many of the etchings were exhibited in the salons at the time of their execution around 1860. For example, this

print, *Rotherhithe*, was included in an exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1862. Whistler worked on the plates, he pulled impressions of them, he sold impressions of them, but he didn't actually formally publish them. In 1871, the plates were acquired by the firm of Ellis and Green, and they published them in an edition of a hundred.

This particular scene was done from the Angel Inn in Rotherhithe, on the Thames River. In the National Gallery's collection, there is a painting called *Wapping* quite closely related to this etching. At the left of the image in the painting there is a third figure, who is thought to be Whistler's mistress and model, Jo Hiffennan; the central figure in the painting is a portrait of the French artist, Alphonse Legros. But the two figures in this etching are not known.

Whistler was especially interested here in the masts and in the appearance of the shipping vessels themselves. In several of the Thames Set etchings, he paid great attention to the ships as a primary subject of the print. He was still involved with the ideas of Courbet, where the issue of doing a realistic rendering of the subject was important, whereas in his later prints, for example his Venetian prints

when he deals with shipping subjects, he was much more apt to be impressionistic rather than realistic in the way he approached form.

10

***Weary*, 1863 etching and drypoint Rosenwald Collection**

This drypoint portrait of Joanna Hiffennan is titled *Weary*. Joanna Hiffennan was the subject of Whistler's painting, *The White Girl*, also in the National Gallery's collection, and she was the model for several other paintings and prints by Whistler. Of all of the prints that Whistler made, this probably comes closest to the kind of image of a woman in which the pre-Raphaelites were interested. When Whistler moved to London, he became friendly with Dante Gabrielli Rossetti and the pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and spent much time discussing ideas with them. However, the strongly narrative content that one finds in their pictures is quite different from the direction that Whistler eventually took in his work.

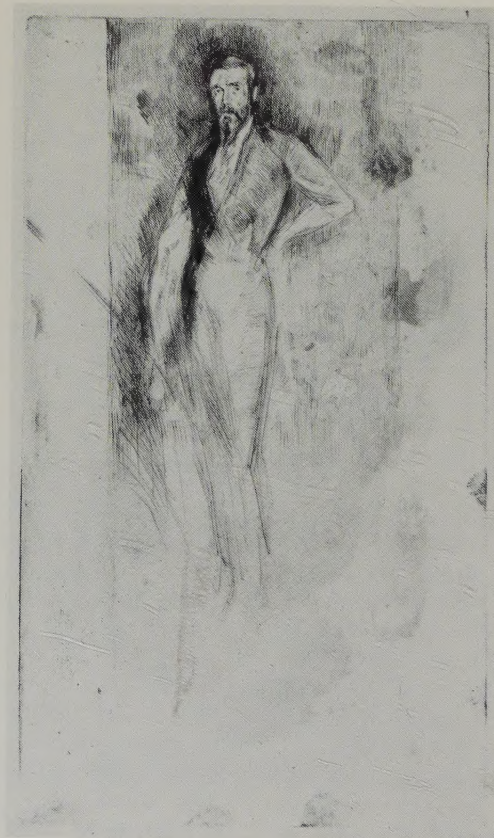
In his portraits, Whistler was apt to focus very carefully on the

features or on certain aspects of the figure. As in this print, it was not unusual for Whistler to emphasize one area of the plate by working it carefully, while other areas of the plate are barely touched — for example, the bottom of the skirt. If you look closely at the lower lefthand corner of this print, you can see a head, upside-down. It was not unusual for Whistler, in his drawings, watercolors, and prints, to take an image that he had used and rejected, turn it upside-down and do another on top of it — and not even worry about the fact that one saw the remnant of the former image.

One of the things that makes Whistler particularly interesting to our own time is his deep involvement with issues of process — with, in a sense, allowing the “trail” of his work to be seen. In the case of the etchings, there are various state proofs that he would work for a while, pull a proof, see how it looked, work further, pull a proof, see how it looked. That’s one aspect of “leaving his tracks showing” that is evident in Whistler’s etchings; but in this case, you see the whole rejected drawing. He was showing you that he did this, he rejected it, and he is now doing something else — and that something else is better.



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F. R. Leyland, c. 1870-1873
etching and drypoint
Rosenwald Collection

From 1869 through 1876, Whistler was very closely associated with Frederick R. Leyland, a Liverpool shipping magnate and his family; this is a portrait of Mr. Leyland. The Leyland family as a whole are the subjects of many paintings, etchings, and drypoints. This particular impression of the portrait of Mr. Leyland is very distinctive because of the way it is printed. It is a rare first state, and you see that Whistler has inked the plate only in the area of the drawing; in wiping it, he has only wiped it clean enough to see the lines that he has drawn onto the plate. He was not at all concerned here with cleaning the surface. This might actually be called a working proof — it's a very personal kind of print — the kind that an artist uses to document something for himself alone. When such proofs become available to the public, they are very precious, because they are a clear example of how an artist thinks — of what the artist goes

through in order to make an image.

12

***Maud, Standing, c. 1873*
etching, drypoint, and
white chalk
Rosenwald Collection**

This is another very special proof of a Whistler portrait. In the portrait of Frederick Leyland, the way it was printed allowed us to see how Whistler was thinking about what he put on the plate. But in this portrait of Maud, we see an example of what is called a “touched proof” — one in which the artist has actually gone back to the printed sheet and reworked it in a drawing material, in this instance, white chalk. If you look along the right-hand edge of the figure, as well as in the central part of her skirt, you will see a white line which stands out quite distinctly from the brown lines of the etching ink. These chalk lines show Whistler considering what to do next to his print. In working an etching or a drypoint, an artist can both add work and take work away; in his use of white chalk, we can assume that Whistler may have been thinking about

taking lines out of this print rather than adding lines.

In the early 1870s, Maud Franklin replaced Jo Hiffernan, whom we have seen earlier, as Whistler’s principal model and mistress; she remained with him for the next fifteen years, serving as the subject for many of his etchings and paintings. This print, which dates from 1872, was done at the time Whistler was working on a portrait of Mrs. Leyland, and Maud was a stand-in for Mrs. Leyland for certain of the sessions as Whistler was working on the painted portrait.

As we see here, it is possible to combine both etching and drypoint in a single print; using more than one technique in a single work is fairly common for Whistler. This print went through many stages — perhaps twelve, probably more — and may have been worked on over a number of years, rather than in one series of sittings.

13

***The “Adam and Eve”,
Old Chelsea, 1879*
etching and drypoint
Rosenwald Collection**

While Whistler’s early Thames

etchings — the ones that he did in the late 1850s and the early 1860s — focused principally on the commercial shipping and industrial aspects of the Thames River, in the late 1870s he became interested in a totally different aspect of the Thames — the more serene, upper stretch of the river. This particular print is thought to be derived from a photograph rather than from the site itself. The print dates from 1879, and it depicts an area of the Thames that had been demolished in approximately 1872. It was one of Whistler’s favorite prints — one that he considered to be a bridge between his very carefully drawn Thames etchings and the more atmospheric Venetian etchings that followed.

The fact that this was done from a photograph is one example of Whistler’s interest in photography. The Whistler Archives at Glasgow University has a large collection of photographs that were in Whistler’s studio. Whistler used photography in a number of ways: he kept photographs of paintings that he admired in his studio, so that he would have them for study purposes; and he also photographed his paintings, so he could rework the photographs in much the same way that he reworked the etching of Maud.

14

***Old Putney Bridge, 1879* etching and drypoint Rosenwald Collection**

In the early 1860s, Whistler became very interested in Oriental prints, in blue and white porcelains, and in all aspects of Japonisme, a subject of interest to artists in both France and England. Whistler's use of Japanese or Oriental elements or subject matter is more apparent in his paintings than in his prints. But in the etchings, Whistler's knowledge of the composition of Oriental prints is evident. In this particular etching, the uptilted view of the bridge, the compartmentalization of areas of the image, and, most of all, the flattening of space are reminiscent of Japanese prints.

This work, entitled *Old Putney Bridge*, shows one of the Thames bridges that was replaced by a more modern iron span within a short time of the date of this etching; thus, this is an example of the way Whistler, in his prints of the Thames, preserved for history a record of the way things looked at an earlier time.

These serene etchings of the Thames were made at a time

when Whistler's life was anything but serene. He broke with Frederick Leyland after they quarrelled over Whistler's unorthodox handling of the designs for the Peacock Room, a major decorative ensemble in the dining room of Leyland's London house. (The Peacock Room is now to be seen in the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington.) Moreover, the artist had filed a libel suit against the critic, John Ruskin, for publicly maligning one of Whistler's paintings shown at the Royal Academy. Whistler won his case in 1879, but, in fact, went bankrupt because the judge awarded him only one farthing in damages and made him pay court costs. Also, during that same time, he was having built in London a house that he called the "White House," designed by Edwin Godwin; it was quite elaborate and very, very costly. The enormous expenses of the Ruskin trial and of building the White House left Whistler penniless and bankrupt. In 1879 and 1880, his house and all of its contents were sold at auction.

During this period of financial and emotional strain, Whistler was receiving considerable support from the Fine Art Society, which, in the 1870s, had published some of his etchings of the Thames. In 1879, the Fine Art

Society commissioned Whistler to go to Venice for three months, to do a portfolio of twelve etchings of that city.

Part II

15

***Nocturne, 1879-1880* etching and drypoint Rosenwald Collection**

Just before Whistler's departure for Venice, he had been making what he called "lithotints," which were lithographs done with a liquid drawing material, very close in effect to watercolor. In Venice the watery, tonal surfaces of the kind he had been exploring in 1878 in his lithography continued to interest him. In some respects, the Venice etchings present a clear break from the Thames etchings and the French Set etchings that he had done earlier in his career. Rather than depending upon clearly defined lines to describe form, Whistler was much involved in exploring methods of printing and wiping his plates in a tonal manner. In their emphasis on tonal printing, the Venice etchings are the closest of all Whistler's etchings to Rembrandt's. This

image, titled *Nocturne*, was printed with so many individual variations that each impression is truly a distinctive print. One might consider each impression a monoprint or a one-of-kind work of art, rather than part of a consistent edition.

Whistler depicted the Venice Lagoon; seen across the water are the spires of the buildings in the background and glimpses of shipping activity in the middle

ground. As with many of the Venice etchings, this image has a band of buildings and boats horizontally across the center. Above it is a band of sky, and below it is a band of water. This configuration, with one band above another, is a compositional strategy that Whistler had explored earlier and reflects, in some measure, his interest in Japanese prints and their characteristic flattening of space.

16

***Long Lagoon, 1879-1880*
etching and drypoint
Rosenwald Collection**

Throughout his career, Whistler printed his etchings in a number of tones of brown and black ink, and the color of ink, to a large degree, alters one's sense of the



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atmosphere of the image. In this Venice print titled *Long Lagoon*, we see an impression that was printed in a very pale brown ink — emphasizing the watery, foggy qualities of the city of Venice. It is one of the most spare of Whistler's Venice etchings in that very few lines are used to capture the sense of form. Buildings with multiple spires, gondoliers in their gondolas — are printed so that they seem as if they're almost disappearing into or emerging from the paper. The Venice etchings in particular represent a kind of impressionistic view of the world and are very much a departure from the realism of Whistler's earlier prints. He was not concerned with describing form so much as describing the *impact* of form on space — presenting the way something feels — its effect, rather than its appearance.

17

***The Palaces*, 1879 etching and drypoint Rosenwald Collection**

The twelve prints included in what is known as the "First Venice Set" are those images that were most highly finished or

most clearly recognizable — the most tourist-oriented images of all. Among them is this print entitled *The Palaces*, the largest of all of Whistler's etchings. The etching plate used for this print measured approximately ten-by-fourteen inches. Many of Whistler's prints are considerably smaller than that, some as tiny as two-by-four inches.

In the context of the work that follows, it is particularly interesting to note that in this print Whistler has chosen to depict the entire facade of the Venetian palace. Many of Whistler's Venetian scenes focus on a doorway, or on a group of windows, or isolate details in an architectural vignette. But in *The Palaces*, he viewed the entire building comprehensively. He gave attention to detail as he did in his Thames prints, but in a very different manner. Architectural detail is rendered loosely. For example, the details in the roof of the building meld together, so that there is a sense of surface instead of an awareness of each line individually. At this point, Whistler was comfortable with the medium, using the etching needle almost as if it were a pen, drawing on paper. His drawing is very direct, with no sense of effort apparent in developing the image.

18

***Garden*, 1879-1880 etching and drypoint Gift of Mr. and Mrs. J. Watson Webb In memory of Mr. and Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer**

Although the Fine Art Society published only twelve of the Venetian etchings in 1880, they exhibited others of the prints in 1883. Throughout the early 1880s many of the other thirty-eight or so prints that Whistler did in Venice were exhibited and, therefore, were known by the public. In 1886, the firm of Dowdeswell & Dowdeswell's took on the task of publishing what came to be known as the "Second Venice Set." This group of etchings totalled twenty-six plates in all — twenty-one of them scenes of Venice and five of them scenes that Whistler did after his return to London.

Twenty-Six Etchings of Venice, the true title of the portfolio, included some of the less traditional views of Venice.

One of them is this print, *Garden*. Similar to *The Mustard Merchant*, the print we saw from the French Set, there is a figure straddling a doorway, here partly



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inside the entrance to the garden, partly outside the entrance to the garden, foot immersed in the canal. There's a charming cat on the stairs; in an earlier state of this print, it actually had been a second figure. Such a change demonstrates the

kind of major revisions that Whistler could make on a plate — taking out an entire figure and replacing it with something as tiny as a cat.

In this print, Whistler used tonal wiping quite differently from the *Nocturne*, where he covered

the entire plate with a very rich, deep brown surface tone. Here, the tonal wiping is seen only in the area of the water. Touches of very dark ink appear on the lower step and in the steps on the right; drypoint additions further enrich the image. The Venice



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etchings were worked over a long period of time. Whistler added details to particular areas as he went along, so that many of the etchings are almost unique objects, rather than part of an edition, though they are not thought of in those terms.

19

The Piazzetta, 1879-1880
etching and drypoint
Gift of Mr. and Mrs.
J. Watson Webb
In memory of Mr. and Mrs.
H. O. Havemeyer

This print, *The Piazzetta*, from the First Venice Set, is among the most active and fully developed of Whistler's vistas of Venice. The street life of the city — buildings, figures, and pigeons — represented in this scene gives a more typical view of Venice than in many of the series. Whistler's use of very delicate line evokes the sense of street activity, with figures and pigeons in motion; Whistler did not describe forms very specifically, but instead concentrated on capturing the action of the birds, the sense of motion, and a feeling of spontaneity.

This is one of the middle

states of this print, which is known in six states, and certain areas were changed later. For example, the clocktower has different kinds of markings, and areas on the piazza are denser here than in the later states. This is an example of one of the Venice etchings where tonal wiping is not principal to the image; wiping the plate clean permitted Whistler to emphasize the drawing more fully.

20

Two Doorways, 1879-1880
etching and drypoint
Rosenwald Collection

As distinct from *The Palaces*, where the whole building was seen, this is one of the examples in the Second Venice Set where Whistler focused on a detail of the building. His major interests here were in the left-hand doorway, which is open, and the figures inside. After the very early stages, much of Whistler's work on this print consisted of adjusting those figures — an old man, a young girl, and a mysterious figure that appears and disappears in the various states of the print. Whistler's attention to the water foretells what he will do later, in

his more fully drawn Amsterdam etchings. In this particular Venice print, he actually drew the shadows in the water, rather than using tonal wiping to evoke a sense of the darkness and depth of the canal.

A number of Whistler's etchings of Venice show us views that allow us to look up a street, or up a canal, so that various actions occur on many spatial levels. Here the main focus is the doorway, but another area that draws our attention is to the far right, where we see a gondolier, and then notice laundry hanging from the buildings. In looking at these prints, the more we look, the more we are apt to see — for example, the decorative detail in the architecture, or the curtains blowing from the window.

From the time of the Venetian etchings, Whistler's prints were trimmed to the plate mark, leaving only a small tab — seen here in the lower left-hand margin — on which he put his signature. A butterfly is the form of signature that Whistler evolved over the years from his initials — JAMW. He used it in the plate as a decorative element in the drawing. He also used it as a hand-drawn signature on the sheet, and often, the dating of Whistler's prints can be done by the format that he used for his butterfly signature.



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***The Smithy, 1880?* etching and drypoint Rosenwald Collection**

The dating of this print titled *The Smithy* has plagued Whistler scholars for some years. It is not clear where or when the print was made, but the tile roofs outside the window at the left suggest that it may have been done in Venice. In addition, the butterfly signature at the base of the anvil, in the lower right corner, is drawn in the manner Whistler used only during the period of time he worked in Venice — that is, a butterfly with carefully veined wings. It is because of this signature and the roofs that the print is now thought possibly to be one of the Venetian etchings.

It is quite different from *The Forge* drypoint seen earlier, although closely related in subject. Whistler made a number of “smithy” images between that drypoint and this print. Here the figures are diminished in compositional importance, being barely visible next to the anvil at the right side of the image. The rendering of the three figures varies considerably in the different

states of the print, and Whistler’s struggle with these forms is attested to by the number of impressions with the artist’s directly drawn additions. He may not have been overly interested in the figures, given his emphasis on the full development of the interior light — the dense darkness in the ceiling and in the eaves of the structure, distinct from the brilliant fire surrounding the figures. If this is a Venice etching, it is one which demonstrates clearly Whistler’s interest in light *per se* and in giving a sense of the atmosphere of a place in preference to rendering objects.

22

***The Village Sweet Shop, c. 1887* etching and drypoint Rosenwald Collection**

During the period of the 1880s, Whistler was reworking many of the Venice etchings as they were being printed — complicating areas of their compositions. Simultaneously, he was producing a large group of very spare prints, many of which took shopfronts as their subject. This print, *The Village Sweet Shop*,

probably dates from about 1886 or 1887. Two areas of interest provide focal points in the composition. One is the doorway on the left, where a group of children are playing, including one hidden away in the shadows — as with many of the figures in the Venice etchings, you have to look carefully to see her. The other focal area is the window, where jars and boxes of sweets are very carefully described. The specificity of Whistler’s rendering of these objects is related in impulse to the kind of realist tendencies seen in his earliest work, but the manner in which he draws is now directed to making objects a part of their environment — not to making them nameable. One never senses that he was attempting to illustrate objects, but he was providing an overall view of a shop window filled with all kinds of bottles with various sweets.

23

***Palaces, Brussels, 1887* etching and drypoint Rosenwald Collection**

In 1887, Whistler traveled to Brussels with his brother and sister-in-law, Dr. and Mrs.

William Whistler. There, the artist made a number of prints of palaces — a subject that he had worked earlier in Venice. The Brussels prints and other prints done during this period were not published as a set and therefore are rarer than the Venetian, Thames, or French Set prints.

This print, entitled *Palaces, Brussels*, shows Whistler's special interest in architectural detail, focusing on vignettes such as the sculptural figures in the central right area, as well as his continued fascination with street activity. The centralization of the composition reflects a longstanding tendency seen quite early in Whistler's work. He is known to have commented upon his way of working — starting his images in the center and moving outward, toward the edges; he stated that when he had reached the edges, the picture was finished.

24

***Hotel L'Allemont, Bourges,*
1888
etching and drypoint
Rosenwald Collection**

In 1888, Whistler married Beatrix Godwin, the widow of

Edwin Godwin, the architect who had designed Whistler's White House in the late 1870s. He and Beatrix went on a tour of France as their honeymoon trip. This etching, *Hotel L'Allemont, Bourges*, was done in 1888 during that trip. Beatrix encouraged Whistler to work in lithography, and between the mid-1880s and the mid-1890s, it was the principal print medium in which Whistler worked. However, during the same period, he made almost a quarter of his entire output of etchings — about one hundred plates.

The architectural subjects of Whistler's lithographs at this time are also the subjects of his etchings, and in both media, he emphasized the vignetted image. He continued to explore facades, but at this particular time he was less interested in what was happening behind windows, or within doorways, or through passageways, than he was with focusing on a discrete architectural element of a building. The figure of a mother holding her child appears here as an isolated couplet, as it had in many of his earlier etchings, and as it would in his late work. His interest in composition has become much more subtle; the white paper itself, because of its dominance of the image, functions to flatten

forms in a way that his drawing had done in some of his earlier works.

25

***Steps, Amsterdam, 1889*
etching and drypoint
Rosenwald Collection**

In 1889, Whistler traveled with his wife Beatrix to Amsterdam, where he completed a group of etchings that he himself felt were the high point of his career. In speaking about them in the context of his work, Whistler said the following:

I divide myself into three periods. First you see me at work on the Thames. Now there you see the crude and hard detail of the beginner. . . . Presently and almost unconsciously, I begin to criticize myself and to feel the craving of the artist for form and color. The result was the second stage which my enemies called inchoate and I call Impressionism. In the third stage — the Amsterdam etchings — I have endeavored to combine stages one and two. You have the elaboration of the first stage and the quality of the second.

This print, *Steps, Amsterdam*,

exemplifies some of Whistler's concerns in working his Amsterdam etchings. Many of them show the facades of the old buildings lining the canal. And as in Venice, he was particularly interested in the reflections in the water. However, in the Venice etchings, he worked carefully to wipe the surfaces of the plate to enhance areas of form and areas of reflection, whereas in the Amsterdam prints, Whistler carefully drew each of the images that he wanted to be seen in the water.

The composition of this print shows another aspect of Whistler's creating layers or bands as the structure for his images. We see a band of water, then a band of the sidewalk, then the lower floor of the building, actively populated by a number of figures. Whistler has moved far from the "realist intention" of his early etchings, but he is still interested in people engaged in their everyday activities. Above the lower floor of the building is another band in which Whistler has depicted laundry hanging on the line, the kind of glimpse of life which also appears in his scenes of Venice. Above the activity of the middle of the picture is a quiet, silent band, where we see faces peering out of the windows. Some figures in the com-



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position are carefully defined, others rather loosely put in; he is interested in telling details — flowers, shrubs growing in window boxes, folds of fabric — all well observed.

Nevertheless Whistler, at this stage, cared very little for spe-

cific articulation of form as he had in the Thames Set. His aim was to integrate detail into the overall atmosphere of the composition. He achieved this, in part, through the working of the plate, combining layers of etching, very light etching lines, and

very rich, deep, dark etching lines; thus, his approach to the medium of etching was far more complicated in these Amsterdam prints. There's much greater variety in the etched line, and while he did add dry-point on occasion, he didn't de-

pend on drypoint to enhance the image in the way he did in many of his earlier prints.

26

***Bridge, Amsterdam, 1889* etching and drypoint Rosenwald Collection**

One sees Whistler's art coming full circle, having started with the Thames and the bridges across the river, and then Venice and its bridges and canals. We now see *Bridge, Amsterdam*, one of the most elaborately drawn images of water in the body of Whistler's etchings. The reflections of specific things are less apparent here than they were in *Steps, Amsterdam*; here, a sense of the movement of the water and sky and the atmosphere of life around the canal become the central subject.

Whistler took great liberties in this print, liberties that he would never have taken in the early Thames etchings. For example, at the far left edge of the bridge, there are two figures, darkly defined and surrounded by a halo of white. Clearly, the white area was left unworked to draw attention to the figures and to frame them dramatically. In

the same way, there is a very sparingly drawn figure at the right edge of the bridge; the bridge railings are not drawn in, so that we know that Whistler was intentionally giving attention to that figure. He has totally omitted any architectural elements that would block her from our view.

In these later prints, Whistler drew in a way that allowed the line to build patches of tone, and these patches of tone eventually form the whole image. He was not interested in permitting us to identify each object in the composition, but in evoking the sense and atmosphere of the scene for us.

27

***Nocturne: Dance House, 1889* etching Rosenwald Collection**

Perhaps more than any of his other etchings, this Amsterdam *Nocturne* expresses Whistler's intention of creating atmosphere and evoking the feeling of a place. In Whistler's earlier views of facades, the windows permitted us to observe the figures within and gain a sense of their

activities. But in this nighttime facade, with only one bright light coming, perhaps, from a barge on the river, we see the windows and sense that there are people behind them, but there is no way of our knowing exactly what their activities may be. In this print, Whistler used no surface tone to enhance the work; the dark, mysterious character of the image is achieved through line alone, used evocatively rather than descriptively.

Although Whistler spoke of the Amsterdam etchings as the culmination of his career, they were not his final etchings. He continued to make etchings almost till the end of his life — the last of them in Corsica, after the turn of the twentieth century.

Whistler produced a large body of work that in its attention to ideas about art spanned the currents of the late nineteenth century. He was able to move from an interest in realism on to an understanding of impressionism; while cognizant of everything that was happening, he developed a very personal kind of image. As much as any other artist of his time, and more than many, Whistler had a feel for abstraction and abstracting and for making art out of nature, without having nature impose itself on the art.

CHRONOLOGY

JAMES ABBOTT MCNEILL WHISTLER

1834-1903

1834

Born July 11, 1834, Lowell, Massachusetts, to Major George Washington Whistler, a civil engineer, and his second wife, Anna Matilda McNeill Whistler.

1843-1848

Family moved to St. Petersburg, Russia; Major Whistler a consulting engineer for building of railroad from St. Petersburg to Moscow. James took classes at the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts.

1848-1849

Whistler in London to recuperate from recurring rheumatic fever; stayed with half-sister, Deborah, who had married Seymour Haden, prominent surgeon, amateur etcher, and collector of etchings. Major Whistler died, 1849; family moved back to America, settling in Pomfret, Connecticut.

1851-1854

Whistler enrolled in West Point; excelled in drawing, but expelled in 1854 for

chemistry deficiency. Worked briefly for Winans locomotive plant, Baltimore, Md.; accepted appointment to drawing and etching staff of U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey, Washington, D.C. Learned basic elements of etching.

1855

Resigned from tedious job drawing maps for Coast and Geodetic Survey; went to London, visited briefly with Haden; with financial assistance from family, went to Paris to study art.

1855-1859

In Paris; enrolled first in Ecole Imperiale et Speciale de Dessin, then atelier of Charles Gleyre. In 1857, traveled with artist Henri Martin to Manchester, England, to see exhibition of "Art Treasures," containing paintings attributed to Velazquez.

1858

Walking/sketching tour of Northern France, Luxembourg, and the Rhineland with Ernest Delannoy; some sketches

from trip basis for etchings, *Twelve Etchings from Nature* ("The French Set"), printed by Auguste Delâtre, published first in France and later in England from Haden's address. Met eminent French artist Courbet; impressed by Courbet's realism. Involved with ideas about art; joined with Henri Fantin-Latour and Alphonse Legros to form Société des Trois. Moved to London, but continued European travel, extended visits in Paris.

1859

Two etchings accepted by Paris Salon; first major painting, *At the Piano*, rejected by Salon; shown in Bonvin's studio in Paris and later exhibited in London. Settled in London in Wapping, near Thames, docks. Painted; began Thames sketches, etchings.

1863

Trip to Amsterdam; moved to 7 Lindsey Row, Chelsea; met neighbor, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, other members of pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood; interested in Oriental art and artifacts; mother moved from America into Whistler's house.

1865

To Cologne, Trouville; painted there with Courbet, Monet, and Daubigny.

1866

To Chile; first night scenes painted.

1867

Friendships with Legros and with Haden terminated by bitter quarrels.

1869

First visit to Leyland family home near Liverpool; many etchings and paintings of family members done in following years.

1871

The Thames Set (*A Series of Sixteen Etchings of Scenes on the Thames and Other Subjects*) published by Ellis and Green.

1876

Decorated Peacock Room in Frederick Leyland's town house in London; design and cost controversial, caused quarrel with Leyland; ended relationship.

1877

Libel suit against critic, John Ruskin, for maligning painting (*Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket*) in inaugural exhibit at Grosvenor Gallery, London. Architect Edwin Godwin commissioned to design "White House" for Whistler in Chelsea.

1878

Moved into White House. Suit against Ruskin tried; Whistler awarded one farthing in damages and ordered to pay court costs, leading to bankruptcy. Began work in lithography.

1879

White House and most of contents sold at auction. To Venice, with commission from Fine Art Society for series of etchings; in Venice fourteen months; produced numerous etchings, pastels, and watercolors.

1880-1883

Exhibitions of First Venice Set and, subsequently, Venice pastels and additional etchings at Fine Art Society. Mother died, 1881.

1885

Delivered *Ten O'Clock Lecture*, statement of his aesthetic credo, in London.

1886

Second Venice set published by Dowdeswell & Dowdeswell's; elected president, Society of British Artists.

1887

Visited Belgium with brother and sister-in-law, Dr. and Mrs. William Whistler. Resumed work in lithography.

1888

Married Beatrix Godwin, widow of architect of the White House.

1889

Trip to Amsterdam.

1892

Took up residence in Paris; continued to travel, work on lithographs, etchings, paintings.

1896

Wife died; Whistler alternated residences between London and Paris.

1898

Elected president, International Society of Sculptors, Painters, and Gravers.

1900

Awarded Grand Prix for etchings and another for painting at Exposition Universelle, Paris; in failing health; trips to Ireland, Algiers, Tangiers, and Corsica.

1901

Moved back to London; health remained poor.

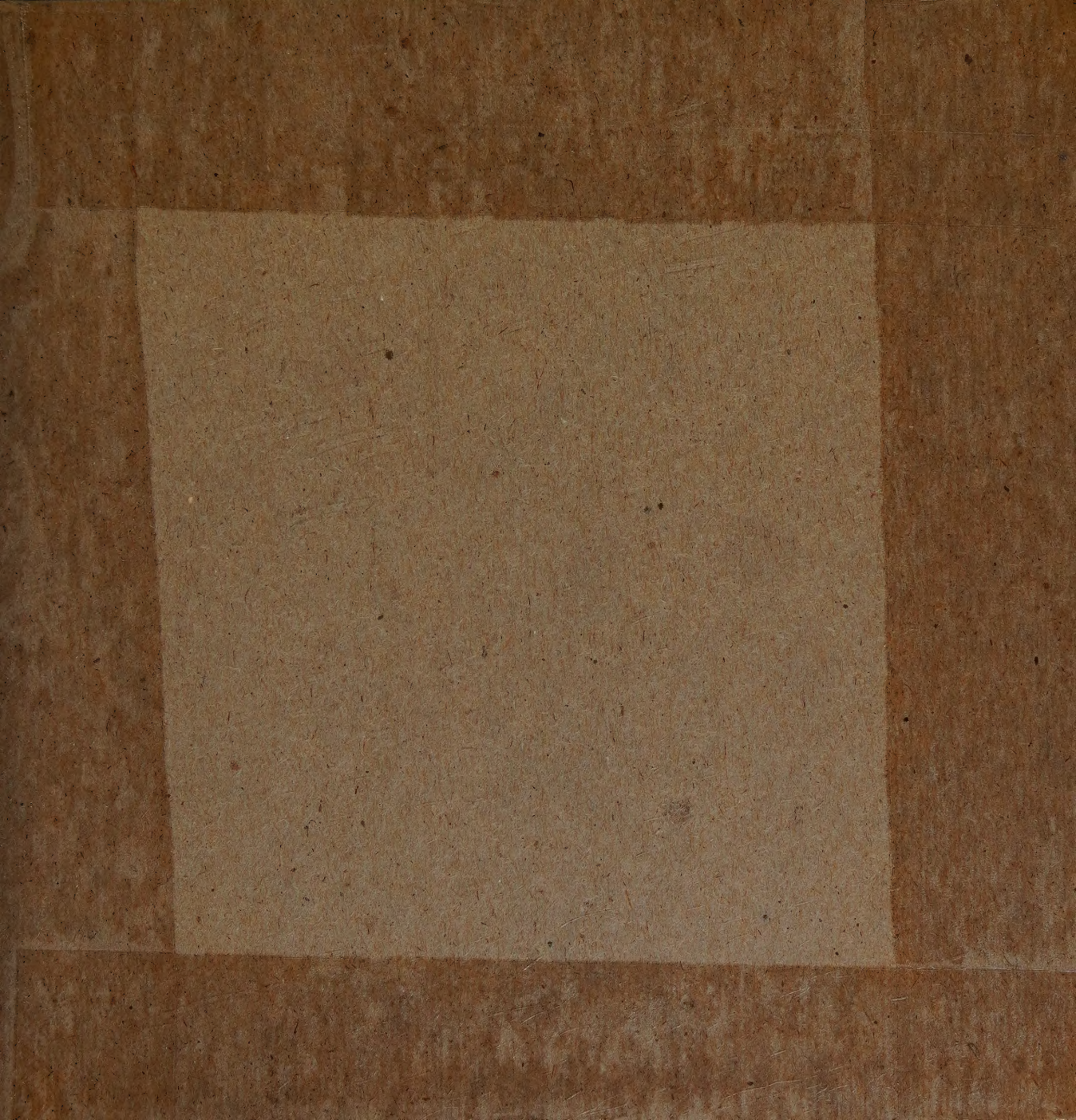
1903

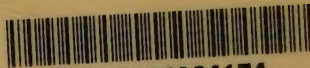
Died in London, 17 July.



M. Dornac

Whistler in his Paris studio c. 1890s
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